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ABSTRACT

The goals of this study were to see if sociology majors are different from other students in what accounts for their interest in classes and secondly to see if the factors producing interest for sociology students vary by the type of class it is. The study was undertaken to help teachers make adjustments which will increase interest, depending on the composition and type of class being taught. Three factors were studied as predictors of course interest: instructor communication, course stimulation, and course applicability. A random sample of sociology majors at a Midwestern University completed a questionnaire for each class they were in. Four types of classes were represented: required courses in and out of sociology and elective courses in and out of sociology. Findings included the following. Instructor communication was considerably less important for sociology majors than it was for students as a whole. On the other hand, course stimulation was a much stronger predictor of interest for sociology majors than it was for other students. There was little difference across the two samples in the importance of course applicability (present or future). The three factors did vary in importance depending on the class type. Instructor communication was the most consistently important explanation of interest for all types of courses. The college instructor still deserved most of the blame or credit for generating student interest. (Author/RM)

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Sociology Students, Interest, and Course Type*

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Sociology Students, Interest,
and Course Type*

Abstract

The course interest of Sociology majors was examined in three ways: 1) what variables are related to interest; 2) are Sociology majors different than others in this regard; and 3) is interest affected by whether the course is in or out of the major and required or elective. The results show that Sociology and non-Sociology students' interest is affected by the same factors but the importance (explained variance) of each factor differs. When interest and related variables are examined by course type, definite differences appear in overall interest and in the relative importance of each variable. The discussion explores the importance of adjusting teaching strategies across courses given these differences.

Sociology Students, Interest and Course Type

What variables are related to the interest Sociology students express in their classes? Do sociology students differ from others in this regard? Is interest affected differently depending on the type of course the students are in? These three questions will be examined with the goal of stimulating thinking about the possible need to use different teaching emphases in different types of courses.

Interest is a difficult construct to define and measure. It is both abstract and multi-dimensional. Yet, we know it exists, and we believe it is an important variable in understanding human behavior. Munn (1962) defines interest as a "learned predisposition to react positively in certain ways toward certain aspects of the environment." He also suggests that interest is usually developed in relation to, and remains allied to more basic motives of the individual. It is risky to speculate what these "basic motives" (wants?) might be, for they certainly must vary tremendously among individuals. However, some fairly widespread interest related wants could be novelty, excitement, order, personal attention, positive evaluation, and utility, among others. The basic concern in this paper is to find what aspects of the college instructional setting affect the interest of the student and therefore have assumedly affected these wants.

IMPORTANCE OF INTEREST

Is it really important to try and create interest within the college classroom? The answer has to be yes for both academic and pragmatic reasons. Interest has been found to be directly related to achievement (Granzin and Painter, 1975; Thomas, et al., 1970). This suggests that interest may be producing motivation to perform well. If Reece McGee

(1974:213-218) is right in asserting that students really teach themselves, and will teach themselves more if motivated, then interest should go a long way in creating that motivation.

In 1973 the American Council on Education surveyed 1,074 sociologists on their goals in teaching undergraduate students (Bayer, 1973). The five most highly endorsed goals by sociologists all require the creation of an interest motivation if they are to be effected. These goals in order of endorsement are: to develop the ability to think clearly; to increase the desire and ability to undertake self directed study; to master knowledge in a discipline; to provide tools for the critical evaluation of contemporary society; to develop creative capacities. If these are our goals as sociology teachers, then logically we should be attempting to isolate means of facilitating them.

On the pragmatic side, interest is related to occupational choice (Granzin and Painter, 1975; Thomas et al., 1970); enjoyment (McGee, 1974); learning (Ericksen, 1970) and course ratings (Granzin and Painter, 1975; Thomas et al., 1970). This latter point is important because it has some interest spin-offs. For example, high course ratings are related to students taking additional courses in a field (McKeachie, 1958; McKeachie and Kimble, 1968), a fact of significance in today's academic setting where allocation of limited resources is linked to student enrollment. Unfortunately, according to Linsky and Strauss (1973), sociology faculties on the whole receive some of the lowest evaluations on teaching compared to other fields. For these reasons, the present study was undertaken.

PROCEDURE

In a recent article (Gigliotti and Fitzpatrick, 1977) the results of a three stage study of predictors of college student interest are reported.

The possible predictor variables were selected by examining the scant existent literature in the area as well as the literature on course and instructor evaluation. Additionally, interviews were conducted with students and faculty to see if they could add to the list. The three studies were conducted on random samples of students from a cross-section of courses at a large Midwestern University. By the third study the non predictive and redundant variables had been eliminated resulting in three major factors (15 variables) which accounted for 66% of the variance in expressed interest. These factors were called "Instructor Communication," "Course Stimulation" and "Course Applicability" (see Table 1 for variables that make up these factors). Further analysis showed that these three factors were stable in the sense that they did not vary much in relative or total contribution, by age, sex, marital status, grade in school, credit load, employment, number of hours employed or overall grade point average. In other words, course applicability (relevance) for example, is not more likely to produce interest in young versus old people or in men versus women and so on. There were only two things that seemed to produce a significant variation in the relative importance of each factor. These were the student's major and the type of course being taken (i.e. required or elective). These latter two findings were the basis for initiating this fourth study. The study was executed on a simple random sample of sociology majors at the same Midwestern University where the previous studies were conducted. In this study the sociology students completed a questionnaire (identical to the one used in the third study) for each class they were in. This resulted in four types of classes: required courses in and out of sociology; elective courses in and out of sociology.

The goal of the fourth study was twofold: to see if sociology majors are different from other students in what accounts for their interest in classes and secondly to see if the factors producing interest for sociology students vary by the type of class it is. The importance of the findings rests in the possibility of making teaching adjustments which will increase interest, depending on the composition and type of class being taught.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

ARE SOCIOLOGY MAJORS DIFFERENT

In Table 1, the Pearson zero-order correlation coefficients of each predictor variable with interest are presented for the sociology sample and also for a cross-sectional sample representing students from all majors.

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Table 1 about here

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The reader can note the variables which through previous analysis (Gigliotti and Fitzpatrick, 1977) were found to be predictive of interest. Additionally, the factor (via oblique rotation) on which each variable loads is presented on the left side of the table. The correlation coefficients for both samples are highly significant and fairly similar. By viewing this table we get a sense that while there are some seeming differences between sociology majors and other students, these differences tend to be minor. Examination of Table 2 provides more insight into this question.

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Table 2 about here

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In Table 2 the results of a stepwise regression analysis of interest on the three factors is presented. The fact that the overall multiple r

and r^2 are very similar for the two samples is encouraging. This result suggests that the factors (and variables that make them up) are both reliable and valid predictors of interest in college students. These factors are also very strong predictors of interest, given the great amount of variance explained. For both samples the order of importance in explaining interest is the same. Instructor Communication is more important than course stimulation which is more important than course applicability. This was the order in which they were introduced into the regression analysis, a fact which will definitely affect the amount of variance which each accounts for. However, this order was carefully determined on a-priori theoretical and empirical grounds (Gigliotti and Fitzpatrick, 1977).

The most interesting part of Table 2 is the difference across the two samples in the amount of interest variance that each factor accounts for. "Instructor Communication" is considerably less important for sociology majors than it is for students as a whole. This difference is almost 11% in the explanation of interest. On the other hand, "Course Stimulation" is a much stronger predictor of interest for sociology majors than it is for other students. Here again the difference is 11% in the explanation of interest. Finally, there is little difference across the two samples in the importance of "Course Applicability." For sociology majors it accounts for about 1% more in explanation of interest.

Are sociology students different than other students in what accounts for their interest in classes? The answer has to be both no and yes. No, because the same variables that account for interest in other students operate similarly for sociology majors. Yes, because sociology majors place a different emphasis on the predictive factors than other students as a

whole do. This fact has applied importance for a Sociology professor who wants to increase interest in the classroom.

DOES THE TYPE OF CLASS MATTER?

In Table 3 a comparison of the four types of courses is made on the predictor variables and the dependent variable of interest.

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Table 3 about here

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Looking first at interest it is clear that elective courses generate more interest than required courses. For sociology majors elective courses outside of their field are more interesting than electives within their field. The difference is not significant however. These are followed by required courses inside sociology and lastly by required courses outside the field (trails badly).

Looking at course applicability, sociology courses (on the whole) are judged to have more career relevance than other courses. However, required sociology courses are equal in judged career relevance to outside electives. If we look at overall judged relevance (not just career), sociology courses don't do as well. Electives in sociology are about equal to electives outside of sociology. Required sociology courses trail both types of electives badly. Required courses outside of sociology are judged to have little if any usefulness for sociology majors.

"Course Stimulation" variables are second to "Course Applicability" variables in the differences they produce across class type. This factor largely reflects the content of a course. With one exception, electives outside of sociology are judged as equal to or more stimulating than any

other type of course. This is generally followed by elective then required courses within sociology. Required courses outside of sociology again come in last. One of the more interesting results here is the pre-course expected interest. The double influence of electives and courses in and out of the major show up clearly. The two electives are very high and equal on pre-course interest. Required courses in sociology are a distant third, with required courses outside of sociology much farther behind in last place. Compare this pre-course interest with interest after one has been in the course. We note that only sociology courses violate the pre-course expectations. Sociology electives are judged to be less interesting than expected and sociology required to be more interesting.

Finally, the "Instructor Communication" variables show little difference across the four types of courses. This finding lends credibility to the study. While we would expect differences on "Instructor Communication" variables from instructor to instructor, we should not find differences on "Instructor Communication" variables across course type. This is true unless the worst communicating professors are being consistently placed in certain types of courses, such as required ones. The only significant differences here show up occasionally when outside requirements are compared with some other types. This could be a result of the larger size of these "service" courses where some forms of communication, such as answering questions, could be inhibited.

The final, most important and useful analysis appears in Table 4. Here we are asking two basic questions. Are these three factors significant predictors of interest for all four class types? Secondly, do the factors vary in importance in generating interest depending on the class type?

The answer to the former question is yes! These three factors are significant predictors of course interest for all four class types. Examining the bottom of the table, we note a multiple r range from .760 to .833 and an r^2 range from .578 to .694. These factors predict interest best for elective courses in sociology and least for elective courses outside of sociology. However, in all cases the amount of variance explained is very high, and significant.

Turning to the second question, the factors do vary in importance depending on the class type. The instructor's ability to communicate, to present the material clearly, is most important for generating students' interest in elective courses. This probably reflects the self choice aspect where the material is prejudged to be stimulating and only the instructor's ability to present it is problematic. By that logic, then, we would expect that when students must take a course, their concern will focus heavily on whether the material will be useful and reasonably stimulating. These would then become major factors generating student interest. Table 4 provides evidence that this is so. Course Stimulation explains much more of the variance in interest scores for students in required as opposed to elective courses.

A fascinating aspect of Table 4 is the amount of variance in interest explained by the "Course Applicability" factor. It appears that "Course Applicability" or the oft heard phrase, "relevance" really comes into play only in required courses. Course Applicability explains over 9% of interest variance in courses required outside sociology and almost 7% in required courses in sociology. Contrast this with elective courses where the variance explained ranges from less than 1% to almost 1 1/2%. Why this is so is uncertain. It is clear however that instructors in required

courses are at a disadvantage and must work harder to demonstrate relevance than counterparts in elective courses if they want to generate high interest. This compensatory component could reflect the "norm of independence" that Wagner Thielens (1977:177) contends exists among the college student population. A required course says "you must," "you have no choice." The instructor of such a course encounters a "resistance" which in part can be overcome by demonstrating that it is "worth it" (useful) after all.

This discussion should not prevent us from noting that Instructor Communication is still the most consistently important explanation of interest. The relative degree of importance varies considerably across course type. In the elective courses it is the most important of the three factors, accounting for all but 13% of the explained variance. In the required courses its relative importance reduces considerably but nevertheless it still accounts for almost half of the explained interest variance in required courses outside of sociology. Required sociology courses are the only setting in which it reduces to second place in importance but still accounts for about 38% of the total explained variance. It appears from this that the college instructor still deserves most of the blame or credit for generating student interest.

CONCLUSION

Wagner Thielens (1977:160) states "...a student's learning definitions require attention because they can have determining influence upon his objective learning processes and outcomes." Within the context of W. I. Thomas' oft quoted phrase we may contend that if students define a class and its circumstances as interesting then the consequences can be dramatically improved learning and positiveness of attitudes.

In the present research we see that student interest is linked to a number of manipulable characteristics of the instructor and the class. We also note that while the effect of these characteristics on interest is fairly constant across a large number of demographic factors (Gigliotti and Fitzpatrick, 1977), their effect does seem to vary significantly depending upon the required/elective, in/out of major status of a course. It does not seem unreasonable to conclude that an instructor could adjust his/her approach and emphases to teaching when they have an awareness of the differential importance of these factors in the different types of classes they teach.

In an earlier article (Gigliotti and Fitzpatrick, 1977) suggestions were made on how the college instructor could manipulate the variables which are included in each factor, so as to improve student interest. These suggestions were drawn from interviews with college students and "best professors." In reality however it is difficult to make valid "blanket" suggestions. Effective adjustments, for example, in making the course more "applicable" or in "presenting ideas understandably" would probably vary from course to course depending on such things as course content, size, previous student training in the area and so on. The results presented in this paper provide a basis for instructor experimentation with the variables isolated and a strategy for deciding how much emphasis should be given to each in the different types of classes. What specific adjustments can be made requires the instructor's situational insight. A suggestion would be to employ a pre-course, post-course interest measure, with adjustments in different classes of the same course being the treatment.

Improvement in teaching requires the kind of systematic observation just discussed. Controlled adding, changing and dropping of teaching

techniques over time can yield the improvement that most college teachers seriously desire. This paper provides one framework for making such adjustments.

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Table 1

Correlation[a] of Interest with Variables

	Predictor Variables	Cross Sectional Sample N = 213	Sociology Sample N = 387
Factor 1 Instructor Communication	Lecture Speaking Ability	.61	.56
	Clarifies Through Examples	.53	.54
	Presents Ideas Understandably	.61	.51
	Ability to Answer Questions	.55	.48
	Degree of Lecture Organization	.60	.35
	Continuity of Lectures	.67	.50
Factor 2 Course Stimulation	Like Instructor's Personality	.62	.60
	Interestingness of Text	.59	.65
	Informativeness of Text	.56	.61
	Interestingness of Lect. Mat.	.74	.71
	Informativeness of Lect. Mat	.73	.69
	Pre-course Expected Interest	.33	.43
Factor 3 Course Applicability	Course Use for Career	.59	.53
	Course Use: Present Personal	.50	.53
	Course Use: Future Personal	.59	.57

[a]All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

Table 2

Regression of Interest on Predictor Factors for Whole Samples

Predictor Factors	Cross-Sectional Sample			Soc. Sample		
	Simple r	Variance Explained	F	r	Variance Explained	F
Instructor Communication	.706	.499	31.591	.625	.390	22.765
Course Stimulation	.736	.124	39.953	.783	.234	109.547
Course Applicability	.638	.036	21.201	.598	.045	51.874
	Mult r = .811 r^2 = .658 F = 130.378 P = < .001 N = 206			Mult r = .818 r^2 = .669 F = 258.44 P = < .001 N = 387		

Table 3

Mean ($\bar{x}$) Comparison[a] of the 4 Course Types

Variables by Factor Groupings	Type 1 Required Outside Sociology N = 85	Type 2 Elective Outside Sociology N = 80	Type 3 Required Inside Sociology N = 139	Type 4 Elective Inside Sociology N = 75	Non-Significant Comparisons[b] by Course Type
Interest	4.44	6.79	5.87	6.28	2-4; 3-4
Factor: Course Applicability					
Usefulness For Career	3.14	5.88	5.84	6.61	2-3
Usefulness For Present Personal	3.18	5.61	4.37	5.40	2-4
Usefulness For Future Personal	3.52	6.25	5.19	6.23	2-4
Factor: Course Stimulation					
Interestingness of Text	4.58	6.26	5.14	6.04	1-3; 2-4
Informativeness of Text	5.42	6.89	6.10	6.69	2-4
Interestingness of Lecture Material	4.65	6.35	5.64	5.54	3-4
Informativeness of Lecture Material	5.28	6.80	6.19	6.58	2-4; 3-4
Pre-Course Expected Interest	4.44	6.83	5.30	6.83	2-4
Like Instructor's Personality	5.67	7.16	7.30	6.57	2-3; 2-4
Factor: Instructor Communication					
Ability to Answer Questions	6.53	7.16	7.23	6.79	All but 1-3
Lecture Speaking Ability	5.75	6.91	6.72	6.36	All but 1-2; 1-3
Clarifies Through Examples	5.41	6.85	6.93	6.42	2-3; 2-4
Continuity Across Lectures	6.44	6.93	6.46	6.42	All
New Ideas Presented Understandably	3.84	4.03	3.94	3.92	All
Lecture Organization	3.86	3.82	3.79	3.85	All

[a]For all variables, the higher the value the more positive the score. Values range from 1 (Low) to 9 (High) except "Lecture organization" and "New ideas presented understandably" which range from 1 (Low) to 5 (High).

[b]All comparisons are via t-tests for significance of difference between course type means. All the comparisons are significantly different ($p \leq .05$) except those listed in this column. Space limitations required this procedure. Those not meeting this criteria for any given variable are listed in the right hand column.

Table 4

Regression of Interest on Predictor Factors for Four Types of Courses

Predictor Factors	Req. Outside Soc. Simple r	Req. Outside Soc. Variance Explained	Req. Outside Soc. F	Elec. Outside Soc. Simple r	Elec. Outside Soc. Variance Explained	Elec. Outside Soc. F	Req. Inside Soc. Simple r	Req. Inside Soc. Variance Explained	Req. Inside Soc. F	Elec. Inside Soc. Simple r	Elec. Inside Soc. Variance Explained	Elec. Inside Soc. F
Instructor Communication	.57	.323	6.82	.67	.448	4.02	.48	.227	3.19	.75	.560	8.56
Course Stimulation	.75	.247	17.57	.74	.116	14.82	.72	.296	40.82	.81	.127	16.937
Course Applicability	.63	.094	22.51	.44	.014	2.55	.57	.069	22.68	.44	.008	1.772
	Mult r = .814 r^2 = .663 F = 53.169 P = .001 N = 84 D.F = 3,81			Mult r = .760 r^2 = .578 F = 34.718 P = .001 N = 79 D.F = 3,76			Mult r = .769 r^2 = .592 F = 65.188 P = .001 N = 138 D.F = 3,135			Mult r = .833 r^2 = .694 F = 53.70 P = .001 N = 74 D.F = 3,71		